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Gudaitis, Emily L., "UNICEF Kid Power: Empowering Kids to Get Active and Save Lives" (2016). *Master's Projects and Capstones*. 391. <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/391>

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UNICEF Kid Power: Empowering Kids to Get Active and Save Lives

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Abstract

UNICEF Kid Power is a program aimed at increasing U.S. children's activity levels by tapping into children's intrinsic desire to do good. Through their activity levels, kids earn points, which unlocks funding from partners that will support treatment for a malnourished child. This one-of-a-kind program was implemented in the Bay Area in Spring 2016 with 7,800 youth participants. The attached paper is a summary of a 300-hour fieldwork experience at the U.S. Fund for UNICEF assisting with the UNICEF Kid Power implementation in the Bay Area. The fieldwork included program implementation and evaluation, presentations at participating schools in the area, coordination of local community outreach events, support to seek and secure funding for the program, collaboration with colleagues across the U.S., and marketing the program to the public. This paper also notes how the fieldwork project achieved several Masters of Public Health competencies, as well as the values of the MPH program at University of San Francisco.

*UNICEF Kid Power: Empowering Kids to Get Active and Save Lives***Introduction**

This paper discusses my fieldwork experience at the U.S. Fund for UNICEF supporting a program called UNICEF Kid Power. UNICEF Kid Power is an initiative through the U.S. Fund for UNICEF that gives kids the power to save lives. According to a report by Designed to Move, one in four children in the United States is sedentary (Designed to Move, 2014). The recent decline of physical inactivity among children is an area of great concern, especially since physical inactivity can lead to adverse effects on an individual's health, academic or job performance, finances, and overall quality of life in adulthood (Designed to Move, 2014).

Meanwhile, one in four children globally is malnourished (U.S. Fund for UNICEF, 2016). Severe malnutrition can result in a child being either severely under or overweight, experience stunted growth, and have a greater risk of dying from infections (UNICEF, 2016). To treat malnutrition, UNICEF gives children ready-to-use therapeutic food packets (RUTF), which is a peanut paste filled with energy and micronutrients. These packets are considered to be a highly effective and innovative treatment because they provide all the nutrients needed for recovery, have a good shelf-life, are not water-based and don't require refrigeration, are liked by children, easy to use without close medical supervision, and can be used in combination with breast-feeding (UNICEF, 2013). Although RUTF packets are a proven cost-effective intervention for severe malnutrition, a lack of funding has prevented the scale-up of this treatment.

UNICEF Kid Power aims to address both physical inactivity and malnutrition with a single innovative solution. The program encourages kids to get active by tapping into their intrinsic desire to do good. UNICEF Kid Power connects U.S. kids' physical activity to social

impact through a child-friendly wearable technology platform (see Appendix A) and an innovative funding model. The more steps a kid takes, the more Kid Power points they earn, which unlock funding from partners that send RUTF packets to malnourished children around the world. The UNICEF Kid Power school model is a program aimed at children in third through fifth grade in low-income schools in participating cities across the country. The program was piloted in Sacramento, California in Fall 2014 and has grown to over 140,000 students around the country. UNICEF Kid Power launched in 13 cities, including the Bay Area, in Spring 2016. Additionally, the program has a family model component, where families all around the U.S. can purchase UNICEF Kid Power bands at Target and participate through a mobile app. In the years to come, UNICEF Kid Power aims to grow substantially in cities all across the U.S.

Background

Physical Inactivity & Benefits of Physical Activity

Unfortunately, physical inactivity in children has become the norm. Physical activity rates in the U.S. have declined by 33% in approximately 1.5 generations (44 years) and is on track to drop a total of 46% by 2030 (Designed to Move Report, 2014). Furthermore, rates of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity in American children decreases by roughly 75% between the ages of nine to fifteen (Designed to Move Report, 2014). Not only does physical inactivity have a direct effect on the health and development of youth, but it is also not socially, physically, or economically sustainable. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that children and adolescents age 6-17 should have at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day (CDC, 2016). Furthermore, the CDC advises children and adolescents to engage in vigorous-intensity, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening exercises at least three days a week (CDC, 2016). Researchers have found that the health benefits of physical

activity in school-aged children are apparent even in small amounts. Health benefits range from decreased risk of developing obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, low bone density, metabolic syndrome, depression, and injuries (Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010). Aerobic-based activities have the greatest health benefit because they stress the cardiovascular and respiratory systems (Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010).

A study looking at barriers to physical activity in low-income neighborhoods in the U.S. found youth's perception of the lower quality of facilities and the inability to pay facility fees were obstacles to engaging in more frequent exercise activities (Romero, 2005). Additionally, the study found that youth who had a perception of more safe adults at local facilities were more likely to participate in physical activity. Majority of the youth surveyed in this study (63%) reported being active in after-school programs, which supports that this could be a potential mechanism to increase physical activity rates (Romero, 2005).

Case Studies of Youth Fitness Programs

Schools have been found to be an effective setting for students to be physically active due to the amount of time youths spend in school each day. Implementing multicomponent physical activity programs in schools has great potential to increase youth's level of physical activity. These programs consist of growing the physical education curriculum, increasing lesson time, having well-trained and qualified teachers, increasing the level of moderate-to-vigorous intensity in the exercise, implementing physical activity both before and after school, and encouraging active transport to-and-from school when possible (Piercy et al, 2015). Additionally, researchers have found that children who participated in a 30-minute structured recess had moderate-to-vigorous activity levels that increased from 23% to 49.7% (Howe et al, 2012).

Fuel Up to Play 60 (FUTP60) is an example of a school-based program that aims to increase healthy eating, as well as the encouraging youths to be active for at least 60 minutes a day (Hoelscher et al, 2016). To further the engagement with the 72 schools participating in the program, FUTP60 had two main components: social marketing elements that leverage NFL role models to motivate and engage youth, as well as a web-based support system for school program leaders. The most common strategy to improve a school's healthy eating was to increase the school's breakfast participation and the taste-testing/selection of new foods. In order to increase a school's physical activity levels, the most common strategies were to focus on new before and after-school activities, as well as encourage participation in daily walking clubs. Results showed that this program was effective because participating kids were 1.27 times more likely to eat whole grains at least three times a day (Hoelscher et al, 2016). Additionally, these kids were 1.15 times more likely to participate in 60 minutes of physical activity for each of the last seven days, as well as 1.25 times more likely to join at least one sports team at school (Hoelscher et al, 2016). This study showed that a low-intensity, flexible approach to wellness changes in schools can lead to small behavioral changes in the students. Additionally, the influence of NFL players further motivated youth to lead a healthier lifestyle (Hoelscher et al, 2016).

An additional case study is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Celebrate Fitness Program, which focuses on Native American youth (Brown and Kraft, 2008). The Celebrate Fitness program gave tribal youth councils small grants to design and implement programs in their communities that encouraged physical activity. The article highlights the institutional challenges that several groups face when working across multiple levels such as small bureaucratic agencies, political governing bodies, and outside public and private organizations. Lessons learned from this initiative that can apply to other programs are to think about

institutions, set realistic expectations, enlist junior partners, trust but verify, and accentuate the positive (Brown and Kraft, 2008).

Another example of a successful intervention program is Project FIT, a two-year program focusing on nutrition and physical activity intervention in low-income elementary schools. Project FIT has a few qualities similar to UNICEF Kid Power, which were found attributable to its success. The program's marketing messages did not focus on obesity prevention, but rather emphasized the promotion of nutrition and physical activity knowledge. Advertising the program in this light seemed to have an effect on its success. Additionally, there were several partners that collaborated on the project and teachers were encouraged to use whichever Project FIT curriculum they deemed best for their students (Alaimo et al, 2015). The community's ability to give their input and get involved allowed the program to be well received.

Kids' Desire to Help Others

The UNICEF Kid Power program has a unique feature, which is that kids in the U.S. have the power to improve lives of malnourished children in developing countries. Researchers Rebecca Lakin and Annette Mahoney explored the concept of youth empowerment and promoting positive youth development through community service programs (Larkin and Mahoney, 2006). They found that the youth service programs' effectiveness was optimized when key variables to youth development were targeted. This was attempted through the "inclusion of activities and structures that promoted adolescent empowerment and the sense of community" (Lakin and Mahoney, 2006), which are two important qualities also apparent in UNICEF Kid Power.

Furthermore, the article "Giving Leads to Happiness in Young Children" found that toddlers show greater happiness when giving treats to others than receiving treats themselves

(Aknin, Hamlin, and Dunn, 2012). Young children appeared even happier when the giving involved sacrificing their own resources. As noted in the article “this research provides foundational support for the claim that experiencing positive emotions when giving to others is a proximate mechanism for human cooperation and prosociality” (Aknin et al, 2012, p. 3).

Children participating in UNICEF Kid Power have a similar sense of giving through their ability to use their own resources to get active and earn Kid Power points, which will ultimately save numerous lives from malnutrition.

Agency Description

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was started in the aftermath of World War II supplying urgent assistance to help ill and starving children in Europe, the Middle East, and China. Today, UNICEF is a leading humanitarian and development agency that works in over 190 countries and territories to save and protect the world’s most vulnerable children. UNICEF’s efforts include water and sanitation, vaccination, HIV/Aids, Malaria, nutrition, education, child protection, disabilities, and emergency relief from natural disasters or political conflict (UNICEF, 2016).

The U.S. Fund for UNICEF supports UNICEF’s work and additional efforts in support of the world’s children through fundraising, advocacy, and education in the United States. The non-profit organization was founded in 1947 and is the oldest of 36 national committees that support UNICEF’s work worldwide. Both UNICEF and the U.S. Fund for UNICEF are headquartered in New York City. The U.S. Fund for UNICEF, consisting of just over 200 employees, works alongside governments, civic leaders, celebrities, corporations, campus groups, religious institutions, teachers, and passionate individuals who are willing to help advocate for the survival and well-being of every child around the world (U.S. Fund for UNICEF, 2016).

The U.S. Fund for UNICEF and UNICEF work alongside each other to prevent 16,000 children under the age of five from dying of preventable causes every day (U.S. Fund for UNICEF, 2016). In order to help every child survive and thrive, UNICEF faces several challenges when trying to reach children in need, such as lack of funding, political conflict, opposition to vaccination, and hard-to-reach areas. UNICEF is constantly trying to find the most efficient, low-cost, and innovative solution to every issue. Furthermore, UNICEF advocates for an extremely vulnerable population, one that does not have a voice. Because of this, education and advocacy are crucial to increase the global awareness about the health issues that children around the world face every day.

The U.S. Fund for UNICEF's priority goals are to increase the amount of funds raised, maintain an efficient program expense ratio, further support international development, increase the engagement and emotional connection with the American public, and grow UNICEF Kid Power to be a successful, well-known domestic program.

Project Implementation

UNICEF Kid Power was launched in the Bay Area in January 2016 with over 7,800 participants in 40 different schools. The program aims to reach 3rd through 5th graders in high-need schools, which is demonstrated by the fact that 87% of the program participants receive free or reduced meals at school. UNICEF Kid Power costs \$50 per student, which was funded by Target, Disney, and the Super Bowl 50 Legacy Fund. In order to participate in the program, teachers needed to fill out an online application and meet the following criteria: 75% of their students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, have a principal who is enthusiastic about the program, identify a school champion to be a connector between the school and the Kid Power

team, and have the ability to scale up the program so at least 100 students at the school can participate.

Once schools were identified, UNICEF Kid Power kits were shipped to each classroom consisting of a wearable fitness tracking band for each participant, a user-friendly tablet to sync participants' progress, and materials for teaching a curriculum about physical activity and global malnutrition. Kids earn one Kid Power point for every 2,400 steps. UNICEF Kid Power promotes a daily goal of five points, which requires 12,000 steps and is equivalent to the daily activity goal recommended by the National Institutes of Health (Adams et al, 2013). During Kid Power month, ten Kid Power points unlock a ready-to-use therapeutic food packet for a malnourished child. Students are encouraged to continue participating in UNICEF Kid Power once the month is over, although due to limited funding, it takes 25 Kid Power points to unlock a RUTF packet. In order to track their individual progress, as well as the progress of their classroom team, students were advised to sync their Kid Power band to the classroom tablet. This gave the program a friendly competition, where classroom teams could compare their activity levels to other teams in the Bay Area. Additionally, there were incentive prizes donated by local funders for the top three teams, to further motivate students to increase their daily physical activity level.

Educate Youth about Nutrition, Global Malnutrition, and Physical Activity

A portion of my fieldwork consisted of teaching students at local participating schools about UNICEF Kid Power. I worked alongside the Bay Area Global Citizenship Fellow to create and give presentations to various classrooms. During these presentations, I would educate children about UNICEF and its work with children around the world, nutrition and why it is important for a child's health and development, the scale and symptoms of global malnutrition,

and ways to incorporate physical activity into daily life. Education on these topics was key to this program because it taught students the meaning behind their actions. Not only did students learn about the importance of nutrition and exercise for their own bodies, but they also learned how they can get more active for their own wellbeing, as well as to help save the lives of malnourished children around the world. Visiting classrooms was an interactive way to increase students' engagement in the program.

Support the Implementation of a National Program at a Local Level

Since the program was taking place in thirteen different U.S. cities all at the same time, local support was needed to ensure that the program ran smoothly. This consisted of communicating between various teams across the organization, all who played a different role in the program. Since this was the first time for UNICEF Kid Power in several cities, there was a lot of learning to be done on how to streamline the program activation among all regions. The scale of the program also meant that all marketing and promotion for the program had to be consistent across every region. Additionally, there was a certain amount of funding needed in order for the program to take place in the Bay Area. I collaborated with colleagues to explore potential funders, edit grant proposals, and report on program successes to the funders. This consisted of researching local foundations and influencers both online and in our current donor database, as well as making sure proposals and program reports articulated the program and its impact in a strong manner. It was important to not only find the right funders for the program, but to build a strong relationship with them in order to sustain their financial support.

Community Outreach Events

During my fieldwork, I coordinated two community outreach events, as well as assisted with the UNICEF Kid Power demonstration at the Super Bowl 50 Legacy Fund Press

Conference and a UNICEF Kid Power Celebration at a Sacramento Kings game. The first community event was a Speaker Series luncheon on UNICEF Kid Power, featuring the CEO and President of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, Caryl Stern. About 50 guests attended the luncheon, which was hosted by the J.P. Morgan Philanthropy Center. Attendees were various supporters of the organization, potential funders for the program, and local community leaders. Having one of the program's creators speak to the local community about Kid Power and its vast impact on malnourished children was incredibly inspiring. Not only was this event educational, but it also promoted the program to the community to gain further support, which will ultimately determine its sustainability. Without the support of community leaders and funders, UNICEF Kid Power would not exist.

Additionally, I coordinated a UNICEF Kid Power Celebration event at DeMarillac Academy, a participating Kid Power school located in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood. This event included a pep rally with a San Francisco 49ers player and guests from corporate sponsors, such as Star Wars characters and Target volunteers. The presence of a local athlete telling youth about the importance of exercise had a significant influence on these children. Using the local community to encourage and empower these children only furthered their engagement in the program. Throughout the event, there were bursts of quick exercises so the students could understand that continuous exercise throughout the day can have a great impact. It also further instilled the concept that their individual progress has a measurable contribution to that of their classroom. Another component of the event was classroom based focus groups, where kids discussed their takeaways from participating in the program. Kids were asked about their favorite part of UNICEF Kid Power, what they have learned so far, what they would say to convince a principal to bring UNICEF Kid Power to their school, and examples of ways that they are being

more active. Hearing this feedback directly from the kids themselves was a valuable aspect to the program evaluation.

Findings

Data was collected through teacher surveys (n=163), qualitative focus groups with both students and teachers, and the syncing activity on the tablet application. Kid Power students were found to be 55% more active than their peers not participating in the program. Additionally, Kid Power participants met daily moderate-to-vigorous activity goals on 30% more days than before they began the program. Overall, teachers had a very positive experience; 96% stated that they would participate in the program again and 95% said that they would recommend UNICEF Kid Power to their colleagues. Furthermore, 95% of teachers noticed a positive change in their students' activity levels. When asked about their favorite part of the program, kids emphasized that they enjoyed being more active and expressed a feeling of empowerment through their ability to save lives around the world. The students were also able to list several ways to be active, including "running in place or doing jumping jacks while waiting in line". Students' ideas to convince a principle to bring UNICEF Kid Power to their school was to inform them that it motivates kids to exercise more, as well as inspire them to be more appreciative and generous. One teacher noted that several of these children are often recipients of philanthropic efforts, so it is inspiring that they have the ability to help others with simple actions. After talking with these kids, it is clear that this program not only has an impact on their health, but also their overall wellbeing.

Kids in the Bay Area averaged about 10,700 steps per day during Kid Power month in January 2016. As of June 1, 2016, 383,000 packets of RUTF had been unlocked by children throughout the U.S., meaning that 2,556 severely malnourished children received lifesaving

treatment. After Kid Power month ended, there was an average decrease of 1% in Bay Area activity (month 1: 10,700 steps/day, month 2: 10,100 steps/day, month 3: 10,600 steps/day, see Appendix B). Since kids stopped syncing their bands on a regular basis after Kid Power month, there is a limitation due to a lack of data post Kid Power month. Although, it is apparent that kids' who were still participating in the program after Kid Power month maintained a healthy activity level. Unfortunately, only 55% of month one participants remained active in month two, and 42% of month two participants remained active in month three. This data shows that there needs to be a focus on how to sustain kids' participation in the program throughout the year, even after Kid Power month is over. Another area of improvement is the support provided by the U.S. Fund for UNICEF to communicate with teachers and keep them engaged. By the Kid Power month start date, only half (53%) of Bay Area classrooms (n=290) were registered, which is an area of concern. In order to communicate with teachers, the Kid Power team would send weekly e-mails with updates and useful information. Only about 35-49% of these Kid Power e-mails were opened by participating teachers, which shows that this communication method may not be the most effective.

Lessons Learned

Based on the data collected, there are several areas for improvement within the UNICEF Kid Power program. Since only 53% of participating classrooms had their Kid Power bands registered by the Kid Power month start date, there needs to be more local support that can help teachers with set-up if needed. There should be a priority to ship kits to teachers at least two weeks in advance so they have ample time to set everything up. Although the number of daily steps seemed stable after Kid Power month, the number of participants dropped by more than half. Because of this, more needs to be done to sustain students' participation in the program.

Kid Power month is a nationwide campaign, whose purpose is to bring awareness to the program and the issues its working to solve both domestically and globally. After Kid Power month is over, students are encouraged to download the UNICEF Kid Power family app to a mobile or tablet device to continue going on Kid Power missions to unlock RUTF packets. The absence of classroom competition and incentive prizes post Kid Power month may deter kids from continuing to be fully engaged in the program. An area of great concern is that kids' newly acquired high levels of activity are at risk of going back to where they were before the program.

Recommendations

In order to make the program more sustainable, a possible recommendation is to implement more continuous communication between the UNICEF Kid Power team and participating teachers. One idea is to send monthly reminders about ways to incorporate Kid Power band use in their classrooms, which could include fun exercise games or lessons about the importance of healthy living. Although the incentive prizes for the top participating classrooms are only given out during Kid Power month, the Kid Power updates could contain suggestions for classroom oriented prizes that teachers could give to the most active students each month. By continuing to reward and acknowledge students' activity levels after Kid Power month is over, teachers can maintain a friendly competition, which could sustain student engagement.

Unfortunately, less than half of the UNICEF Kid Power e-mails sent to teachers were opened, so alternative methods of communication should be explored. A possibility is to have the app send push notifications to the tablet, which teachers have for full-time classroom use.

Another recommendation to sustain participation in the program is for the UNICEF Kid Power team to host a local community "Kid Power Day", which could take place after Kid Power Month. This can be a free event in a local park where students are encouraged to wear

their Kid Power bands and have a chance to partake in various exercise activities with other Kid Power participants. Additionally, it could be an opportunity to further engage the support of community partners and funders because they would have the ability to see the program in real-time. A community oriented Kid Power Day could remind kids of the importance of exercise and how enjoyable it can be.

Currently, schools are being recruited through recommendations by local community influencers, corporate partners, and funders. These local “Kid Power Champions” have identified the high-need schools in the region. There has not yet been any mass marketing around UNICEF Kid Power; the program has mainly spread by word-of-mouth. Although more funding needs to be secured to launch a mass marketing campaign, promoting the program to various audiences would be a great next step in order to expand the program. Advertising methods should cater to the various groups that the program wants to appeal to, such as corporate sponsors, donors, teachers, parents, kids, and local community influencers. For example, this program could be promoted to teachers through a demonstration at an educators’ conference or it could be beneficial to invite community influencers and funders to take part in a local Kid Power Day. To capture the attention of parents and kids, it may be effective to put advertisements in parent magazines or place commercials on family friendly channels. Although a campaign can be expensive to fund, staff members can strategize if they believe it will have a large return on investment.

Application of MPH Coursework

I applied several aspects of my MPH coursework from various disciplines to my fieldwork project. Through the program implementation, I had the opportunity to assess the health status of low-income children in the Bay Area and their related determinants of physical

inactivity using epidemiologic concepts, such as prevalence. I applied my knowledge of health behavior change theories, such as the Health Belief Model, to the presentations on nutrition, physical activity, and malnutrition that I gave to participating classrooms. By informing kids about these issues, I touched on aspects of the behavior change model, such as perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy. UNICEF Kid Power is a program that is based on the idea of self-efficacy because it gives kids the tools to use their own actions to modify their behaviors and feel empowered to help others. Furthermore, the concept of getting active to save lives teaches youth about their role in making social change. Social justice, a respected value of the University of San Francisco, is apparent in UNICEF Kid Power because kids are learning about how to use their own resources to help those in need. After reviewing relevant literature and writing a literature review on programs aiming to address kids' physical inactivity levels, I found UNICEF Kid Power to be a one-of-a-kind program due to its philanthropic component.

Throughout my fieldwork, I demonstrated leadership abilities as I worked on the Bay Area implementation alongside colleagues around the country. Additionally, this consisted of collaborating on the program's budget so that administrative costs were kept low and majority of funds raised went directly to the program. Funding is needed to sustain the program and in order to receive funding, the program needs to be consistently evaluated to make sure the objectives are being achieved, the impact is significant, and that its financially effective. Funders want to know that their money is being spent well and making an impact. Program evaluation skills, as well as data collection methods and analysis, that were learned in the MPH program were an asset to my fieldwork project.

Conclusion

By continuously evaluating the program and addressing areas of improvement, UNICEF Kid Power can maintain current participant engagement and improve the program's sustainability. An effective and marketable program will help the U.S. Fund for UNICEF secure funding for the program, which will allow UNICEF Kid Power to expand to more U.S. children and become a well-known kids-helping-kids campaign. Since wearable technology is becoming a popular trend, UNICEF Kid Power aims to be the first activity bands that parents will want to buy for their kids.

Inactivity is a huge problem in the U.S., particularly in low-income neighborhoods where kids may not have access to parks, sports clubs or teams, or after-school programs. This program aims to solve a major public health issue with an innovative solution. Ideally, successful programs, such as UNICEF Kid Power, will help influence policy change in the U.S. on topics such as requiring schools to have daily PE class or scheduled recesses. Various school-based interventions have proven that implementing physical activity into the school day is highly effective, especially since kids spend majority of their days at school.

Through my opportunity to be a part of this program, I have learned a lot about program implementation and evaluation. Not only can it be rewarding, but it is extremely challenging, especially with limited financial and staff resources. Everything has to be extremely strategic to make sure that nobody's time or money is being misused. Additionally, we faced several when implementing this program in several different cities, because each city often requires customization for their own market. When I had limited contributions due to my lack of expertise in the area, I had the chance to fully observe my colleagues and learn from their work. Participating in UNICEF Kid Power gave me the opportunity to utilize my newly acquired MPH

competencies to something I'm passionate about: advocating for children's health both locally and globally.

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Appendix A



Appendix B

